

Sentence Structure Part One

(COM3220)

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About this Course

In this course, you will...

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Information

- Identify the subject of a sentence
- Identify the verb of a sentence
- Describe what a fragment sentence is
- Describe what a run-on sentence is



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Introduction

Imagine that you are applying for a new job and are asked to write a one-page statement of your goals and how they relate to the needs of the organization.

How would you feel in response to the request? Would you welcome the opportunity? Would you have confidence that grammatical errors would not come between you and success?



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Introduction (continued)

Most people feel uncomfortable with writing and are convinced that they cannot write well. This discomfort may arise from experiences of being corrected or red-marked, or perhaps there is an embarrassing memory of making mistakes with grammar and spelling.

This course is designed to make you feel more comfortable with your writing. We will start with the basic elements of a sentence and cover basic functions of acceptable syntax (the way we put words together to form a sentence). Remember to try the Resources tab if you feel you are falling behind.

Let's begin!



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Sentence Structure

Grammar is a system by which words are related to one another in a sentence. This section will begin our understanding of English grammar by examining the building blocks of a sentence.

SUBJECT: The subject of a sentence is the person, place, thing, or idea that is doing or being something.

VERB: A verb carries the action or idea of the subject in the sentence.

OBJECT: The object receives the action of the verb or explains why it has occurred.

Most English sentences follow the subject-verb-object format, though the order may be changed.

For example, in the sentence, "**Stan hit the ball**," the subject is "Stan," the person who did something. The verb is "hit," which is what the subject did. The object is "ball," which is what received the action of the verb.

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Subject and Verb

The structure of a sentence usually begins with the subject and verb. All acceptable sentences will have both, either stated or implied, and will express a complete thought. Typically, the subject (the thing that is doing or being something) will appear before the verb, but the order may be inverted. To see the subjects of the sentences below, click on the Subject button.

The book was on the shelf.

I put the book on the shelf.

The book was shelved.

The book about the fugitive was missing.

When I was at the library, I found the book.

[Subject](#)

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The Subject

The book was on the shelf.

The thing that is doing something is "book," which is being on the shelf.

I put the book on the shelf.

The thing that is doing something is "I," which performed the action.

The book was shelved.

The book about the fugitive was missing.

"Book" is the thing that had action done to it.

When I was at the library, I found the book.

The main clause (also known as an independent clause) of the sentence is "I found the book." The phrase that begins with "When" is known as a dependent clause and, in this case, is not the subject of the sentence but describes when the action occurred. A dependent clause has a subject and verb, but it does not express a complete thought (it is a sentence fragment).

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The Subject (continued)

Even if the order is changed, the subject remains the main part of the sentence that relates to the action of the verb. If the subject is not written, it may be implied or understood. To see the subjects of the sentences below, click on the Subject button.

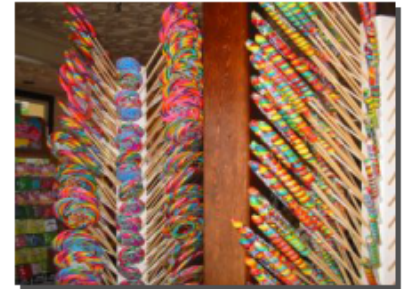
Here is the way to the candy store.

Even more important is the way to the dentist's office.

In the dentist's chairs sat the patients.

Have you visited the dentist?

Go to the dentist.

[Subject](#)

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The Verb

Now that we have explained the subject, let's identify the verbs of those sentences. Remember that the verb carries the action of the subject—it is what the subject does. Find the verbs in each of the practice examples. Clicking on the button will show the verbs in green.

The book was on the shelf.

I put the book on the shelf.

The book was shelved.

The book about the fugitive was missing.

When I was at the library, I found the book.

[Verbs](#)

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The Verb (continued)

The book was on the shelf.

Was describes the action of the subject, as the book was being on the shelf.

I put the book on the shelf.

What the subject did was put.

The book was shelved.

Shelved is part of the main verb because it is the past tense of to shelve, a verb that means to place on a shelf.

The book about the fugitive was missing.

Missing is not part of the verb because it is actually an adjective, describing the book as not being there. This differs from I was missing the target, in which missing is a verb meaning failing to hit.

When I was at the library, I found the book.

The main verb of the sentence is found; was is the verb of the dependent clause.



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The Verb (continued)

Find the verbs in each of the practice examples.
Clicking on the button will show the verb in green.

Here is the way to the candy store.

Even more important is the way to the dentist's office.

In the dentist's chairs sat the patients.

Have you visited the dentist?

Go to the dentist.



Verbs

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The Verb (continued)

Here is the way to the candy store.

The verb is "is," which connects the subject to the rest of the sentence.

Even more important is the way to the dentist's office.

The verb is "is," which is the infinitive form of the verb "to be" (other forms of the infinitive include am, are, been, was, and were).

In the dentist's chairs sat the patients.

Sat is the verb, as that is what the subject did.

Have you visited the dentist?

Have is known as an auxiliary or helping verb. It further defines the action of visited and is considered part of the main verb of the sentence.

Go to the dentist.

What the implied subject ("You") is told to do is "Go."



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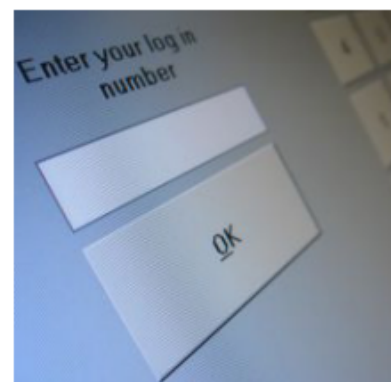
Sentence Fragments

As stated before, the subject, along with the verb, forms the foundation of a sentence's structure. Finding the subject and the verb will eliminate one of the most basic errors of grammatical structure: the sentence fragment.

A group of words that cannot stand by itself as a full and independent thought is a sentence fragment. This error often occurs from a lack of a subject and verb. Consider the example below:

**Some of the people working in the department.
Lacked the necessary access codes.**

"Some of the people working in the department lacked the necessary access codes" is a complete sentence because it has a subject ("some") and a verb ("lacked"). The two phrases above are sentence fragments.



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Sentence Fragments (continued)

Examine the phrases below. Three are sentence fragments, and one is a complete sentence. Select the complete thought. Click the submit button to check your answer.

- ☐ *Back at the office, between lunch break and nap time.*
- ☐ *Going to the store for milk, eggs, honey and dip.*
- ☐ *By a unanimous vote the measure passed.*
- ☐ *Even though he had great speaking skills and was the most personable orator, continually pleasing the crowd with his wit and charm.*

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Sentence Fragments (continued)

Now try these phrases below. Three are complete sentences, and one is a fragment. Select the one at fault. Click the submit button to check your answer.

- ☐ *We're home.*
- ☐ *Weather, a permanent topic of conversation among those whom it does not interest.*
- ☐ *Will justice be served?*
- ☐ *Wait for me!*

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Sentence Fragments (continued)

Sometimes fragments are written deliberately for stylistic purpose. Consider this paragraph:

Without hesitation, Jim dove into the freezing waters and rescued the drowning boy. What courage!

While the second sentence does not have both a subject and a verb, it is a grammatically acceptable sentence within the context of the story. It is not often, though, that you will use a sentence fragment in your professional writing. Unless you have great confidence in your command of language, you will probably be more comfortable making sure that all your sentences have subjects and verbs and express a complete thought.



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Run-on Sentences

The next error to study in sentence structure is the run-on. While some run-on sentences may be long-winded, the length of a sentence really has nothing to do with the problem.

On the longest, cruelest, hottest and most dreary day of an endless and unforgiving summer, we made our pack, loading our bulging sacks with all the supplies we needed, including water, fruit, maps, compasses, extra socks, and tack.

While not very pretty, the sentence above is grammatically sound. A run-on is a structural flaw independent of length. The words "we," "made," and "pack" are the subject, verb, and object, respectively, of the sentence, and all other phrases are only extra modifiers.



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Run-on Sentences (continued)

Many players didn't show up for morning practice the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

The above is a run-on sentence. **It differs from a grammatically acceptable sentence in that there are two complete thoughts (two independent clauses) joined without proper punctuation.**

On the following pages you will find many alternatives for these two thoughts to be constructed in a grammatically acceptable manner.



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Run-on Sentences (continued)

Many players didn't show up for morning practice the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

**Many players didn't show up for morning practice.
The team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.**

In this case the two thoughts are transformed into two complete sentences with a period. "Players didn't show" is the subject-verb arrangement of the first sentence, and "team scheduled" forms the second sentence.



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Run-on Sentences (continued)

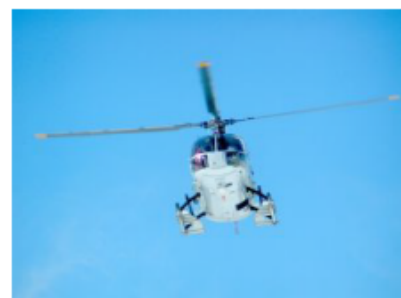
Here are some more examples of splitting a run-on sentence with a period:

Maury rode in the front of the car the other good fellows sat in the back.

Maury rode in the front of the car. The other good fellows sat in the back.

Henry went to the store to buy a hat and later he found that a helicopter had been following him all day.

Henry went to the store to buy a hat. Later, he found that a helicopter had been following him all day.



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Run-on Sentences (continued)

Many players didn't show up for morning practice the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

Many players didn't show up for morning practice, and the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

In this case the two thoughts are joined by a coordinating conjunction, "and." When prefaced by a comma, a conjunction (and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet) can link two related thoughts into one sentence. It is important to note that there must be a comma before the conjunction; otherwise, you will risk forming a run-on sentence.

TIP:

Not using a comma can create a run-on.

Rick went to the nail salon and Brenda went to the gun show.

While some grammarians differ, it is generally thought that these two thoughts should be separated by a comma with the conjunction:
Rick went to the nail salon, and Brenda went to the gun show.

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Run-on Sentences (continued)

Many players didn't show up for morning practice the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

Many players didn't show up for morning practice; the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

In this case the two thoughts are joined into one sentence separated by a semicolon (;). The semicolon should be used only when the two thoughts are closely related. Normally, there is no coordinating conjunction following the semicolon.

TIP:

The other function of a semicolon is to act like a "super comma." The semicolon separates items in a list, especially when a comma is already used:

The mostly commonly misspelled cities are:
Phoenix, Arizona; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Tucson, Arizona; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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Run-on Sentences (continued)

Many players didn't show up for morning practice the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

Many players didn't show up for morning practice--the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

In this case the second thought of the sentence is introduced by a dash (--). A dash is actually a single, unbroken line, though some word processors can form it only by using two hyphens (between the 0 and the +/- on your keyboard).

The dash functions similarly to the semicolon, but its use is rarer because what follows the dash is often a short, explanatory phrase and not a complete sentence. Dashes are often the sign of a dramatic or surprising twist.

TIP:

He walked to work every morning--a 10-mile trip.

Wendy asked the secretary--the shortest person on staff--to place the books on the top shelf.

In these cases what follows or is included by the dash is not a complete sentence.

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Run-on Sentences (continued)

Many players didn't show up for morning practice the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

Because many players didn't show up for morning practice, the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon.

In this case, one of the thoughts has been transformed into a because clause (also known as a dependent clause because it depends on the rest of the sentence to complete its meaning). This device can be used when one action is the result of or reason for another.

"Many players didn't show up for morning practice because the team scheduled extra drills for the afternoon" is also an acceptable expression, but notice how the meaning of the sentence changes.

TIP:

Be careful that you do not use because and since interchangeably. Many do not know there is a difference between the two, and using the words correctly will improve your writing.

Since should be used when time is involved:
Since she was 14, she had wanted to be a dancer.

Because--and not since--is used when one idea is a consequence of another.

Because her mother would be proud of a ballerina, she wanted to be a dancer.

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Knowledge Check

Next, you will check your understanding of the material presented so far. Your grade on this section does not count toward your final course grade.

If you are not able to answer several of the questions correctly, or you feel you have not acquired a competency of the material covered so far, review the content of this chapter again.

Knowledge



Check

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Knowledge Check (continued)

1. What is the main **subject** of this sentence:

After we bought the tickets, Vince and Willie ran through the gate.

- ☐ we
- ☐ *Vince and Willie*
- ☐ tickets
- ☐ ran

Knowledge



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Knowledge Check (continued)

2. What is the main **subject** of this sentence:

Everyone knew what was coming when Bruce gripped the ball with split fingers.

- ☐ ball
- ☐ Bruce
- ☐ Everyone
- ☐ what

Knowledge



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Knowledge Check (continued)



3. What is the main **verb** of this sentence:

Planes, trains, and automobiles are all forms of transportation.

- ☐ *Planes, trains, and automobiles*
- ☐ *are*
- ☐ *transportation*
- ☐ *forms*

Knowledge

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Knowledge Check (continued)



4. Evaluate this sentence:

Splitting the rock with one blow and felling the tree with another.

- ☐ *Fragment*
- ☐ *Complete sentence*

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Knowledge Check (continued)

5. Evaluate this sentence:

I wore a brown-and-yellow hat, however I let one string of hair curl toward the sky.

- ☐ **Run-on**
- ☐ **Good sentence**

Submit Answer

Knowledge



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Chapter Complete

You have completed the first portion of this class, Sentence Structure.

Click the next arrow to continue.

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Subject-Verb Agreement

The focus of the previous section was understanding how the subject and verb, in the correct spots, together make a complete sentence. The second part of this course explores this relationship further.



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Singular and Plural

The subject and verb must agree in number, either singular or plural.

Singular

I, me
 You
 He, she, it, him, her
 Dog
 Mouse

Plural

We, us
 You
 They, them
 Dogs
 Mice

Singular subjects need singular verbs; plural subjects need plural verbs.
 Click on the button to see how the verbs match the subjects.

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Singular and Plural (continued)

One of these four sentences has an incorrect subject-verb agreement. Determine which does not match in number and click the submit button to check your answer.

- ☐ *The horses run from the barn.*
- ☐ *The cattle were frightened by the storm.*
- ☐ *The brown puppy is not willing to go outside.*
- ☐ *The pig walk away.*



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Irregular Plural Forms

You know that most plural nouns end in -s or -es. However, many nouns in English have irregular plural forms. Most of these you already know, but you may need to consult a dictionary occasionally to make sure you are using the correct form. Here are a few examples:

goose, singular; geese, plural
 louse, singular; lice, plural
 woman, singular; women, plural
 ox, singular; oxen, plural
 antenna, singular; antennae, plural
 syllabus, singular; syllabi, plural
 datum, singular; data, plural
 barracks, singular; barracks, plural
 series, singular; series, plural



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Matching Subject and Verb

When you speak, you probably match the number of the subject and the verb without thinking. Phrases like the horses is brown and the dog are wet sound unnatural, and you probably correct them automatically.

However, there are many situations that are trickier. Consider the sentence below:

An important function of managers are delegating responsibilities.

In this case the ear can be confused because while the subject "function" is singular, the noun closest to the verb, "managers," is plural. Should the verb be singular or plural?



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Matching Subject and Verb (continued)

An important function of managers is delegating responsibilities.

The verb should agree with the subject in number, regardless of the other words in the sentence. Do not be tricked by words between the subject and the verb.

How would you grade the sentence below:

The mark of good employees are the willingness to go the extra mile when necessary.

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"and" Rules

Subjects joined by "and" require a plural verb.

An English teacher and a red pen make a dangerous mix.

In this case both teacher and pen are singular, but because they are joined by "and," the sentence requires a plural verb (make). In the following examples notice that a compound subject (two subjects joined by "and") requires a plural verb, but a singular subject uses a singular verb:

A fool and his money are soon parted. are = plural

A fool is soon parted from his money. is = singular

Huckleberry and Jim float down the river. float = plural

Huckleberry floats down the river with Jim. floats = singular

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"and" Rules (continued)

There are exceptions to the "and" rule: When the words joined by "and" act as a single subject, the verb is singular. These exceptions are usually common phrases:

Ham and eggs is my favorite breakfast.

Spaghetti and meatballs is my favorite dinner.

In the cases above, the plural subjects act as a singular unit, and so they take a singular verb. Spaghetti and meatballs is one menu choice, not separate items, and therefore requires a singular verb.



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"and" Rules (continued)

You will need to use your judgment to understand when plural subjects act as a single unit.

The stained carpet and the tile are going to be replaced.

In this case, two separate objects are being replaced, even if both are replaced the same time, so a plural verb is needed.

The star and host of the show left the stage.

In this case, a single entity (the "star and host" is the same person) performs the action, and the verb is singular. Notice the difference to this sentence that contains a plural verb:

The star and the host left the stage.

In this case, the star and the host are two different persons performing the action, not acting as a single unit.

Plural subjects that act as a single unit are typically common phrases, and other examples include **cake and ice cream, pork and beans, pen and ink, and hard work and sacrifice.**

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"and" Rules (continued)

Another exception occurs when two words both describe the same subject. These three sentences have the same meaning, and all use a singular verb:

Barney is my friend and deputy.

My friend and deputy, Barney, watches the jailhouse.

My friend and deputy watches the jailhouse.

In each sentence, one person is the subject, and so a singular verb is used.



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"and" Rules (continued)

Barney is my friend and deputy.

In this sentence the subject is one person, Barney.

My friend and deputy, Barney, watches the jailhouse.

The subject is again one person. Barney may be both a friend and deputy, but he is still only one person.

My friend and deputy watches the jailhouse.

While Barney is not named, the speaker implies that the person who is watching the jailhouse is both a friend and deputy, not two separate persons. Compare this sentence to those on the next page.



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"and" Rules (continued)

These sentences are slightly different. If the subject of a sentence is more than one person, then the verb needs to be plural.

My friend and my deputy watch the jailhouse.

My deputy and your friend watch the jailhouse.

My deputy and my friends watch the jailhouse.



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"and" Rules (continued)

My friend and my deputy watch the jailhouse.

The speaker refers to two persons in this sentence; one is his friend, and the other is his deputy. The verb therefore needs to be plural.

My deputy and your friend watch the jailhouse.

This sentence most likely refers to two persons, though the context of surrounding sentences should make the identity more clear. This slightly different sentence would use a singular verb: "Steve, my deputy and your friend, watches the jailhouse."

My deputy and my friend watch the jailhouse.

Similar to the previous sentence, this sentence can be clarified by the context of the story. It is most likely that the deputy and friend are two persons.



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"and" Rules (continued)

Another exception to the "and" rule occurs in titles.

Whether or not titles of books, films, and other works of art contain singular or plural nouns, the subject is always treated as a singular object.

The Old Man and the Sea makes many references to Joe DiMaggio.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a novel written with a distinctly American style.

Three Musicians, by Picasso, is on display this week at the museum.

In all these cases, the italicized titles are a single piece of work and should be treated with a singular verb.



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Knowledge Check

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Knowledge Check (continued)

1. What is the correct **verb** for this sentence:

The stars in the sky _____ like diamonds.

- ☐ **shine**
- ☐ **shines**

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Submit Answer

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Knowledge Check (continued)

2. What is the correct **verb** for this sentence:

Mind Games _____ by John Lennon in 1973.

- ☐ *was released*
- ☐ *were released*

Submit Answer

Knowledge



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Knowledge Check (continued)

3. What is the correct **verb** for this sentence:

The long and winding road _____ to Mr. Kite's house.

- ☐ *leads*
- ☐ *lead*

Submit Answer

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Knowledge Check (continued)

4. What is the correct **verb** for this sentence:

Horse and buggy ____ not faster than a yellow submarine.

- ☐ **are**
- ☐ **is**

Submit Answer

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Knowledge Check (continued)

5. What is the correct **verb** for this sentence:

Dr. Roberts, accompanied by three nurses, _____ the patients on the third and fourth floors.

- ☐ **visits**
- ☐ **visit**

Submit Answer

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Chapter Complete

You have completed this chapter. Next, you will take the final exam.

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